Article

Structure and Agency: Changes in Personal Agency in the Life Domain of Young Women in Malta

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Abstract

This article examines changes in the degree of personal agency in young women, with post–compulsory education, in the last 50 years in a Southern European reality. It explores strategies of negotiation and resistance to social and cultural conditions, such as restrictive legislation, in a relatively traditional context. The arguments brought forward are positioned broadly within a discourse of individualization—on how women are more than ever devising their lives on their own free-will. There are various structural and cultural changes that had direct impact on the changes in females' personal agency. This article focuses on three of them—the influence of the church, restrictive legislation, and the expansion and extension of the educational system. The data drawn on for this article are taken from interviews conducted in Malta, with two generations of women who were in post–compulsory education in their youth, yet experienced their youth 50 years apart. The implications brought forward include a need for assessing how female agency operates in a relatively more traditional setting in a paradoxical manner. Their degree of female agency demonstrates complex strategies of accommodation and negotiation in line with socioeconomic and cultural conditions.

Introduction

Recently, young women within the Anglo-American context, are more than ever at the center of their own lives and reflexively constructing a "life of one's own" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002/2008). This liberalization from traditional normative gender roles has occurred alongside significant social and economic changes within this context.

In less than 50 years, fundamental changes in women's lives have occurred in terms of gender relations, education, work, legislation, and public life. With the shift from "ascribed" to "achieved" roles, it is argued that the female biography underwent an individualization boost. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/1995), in their book *Normal Chaos of Love*, stated,

> Individualisation means that men and women are released from the gender roles prescribed by industrial society for life in the nuclear family. At the same time, and this aggravates the situation, they find themselves forced, under pain of material disadvantage, to build up a life of their own by way of the labour market, training and mobility, and if need be to pursue this life at the cost of their commitment to family, friends and relatives. (1990/1995, p. 6)

Individualized young women have more choice to decide how to devise their own life projects and work out their ideas about the future. The process of individualization in the female life biography is clearly manifested when examining how the roles of young women are not solely defined in terms of the traditional nurturing role of homemaker and mother. Young women are more than ever displaying expectations that extend beyond the family.

Whereas studies on the process of individualization in the West have come to take center stage in debates, its application in the life domain of women in a Southern European context is more or less absent in the social sciences. This article tackles this shortcoming. Within the structure–agency discourse, this article addresses changes in females' life choices in relation to three social and cultural conditions—the influence of the church, changes in legislation, and the expansion and extension of the educational system. Such three factors are some of the example of structural changes that are analyzed to make sense of the individualization process in a Southern European country.

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There has been a tendency to consider Southern European countries as "backward" when it comes to gender relations (González, Jurado, & Naldini, 2013). This is particularly because of the overall low rate of female participation in the labour market, the legacy of authoritarian regimes or conservative political descendants as well as the Catholic Church and its emphasis on traditional gender roles (González, Jurado, & Naldini, 2013). Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece share certain common traits in the way in which gender inequalities are reproduced or ameliorated by the state, the family, and the labor market, as aptly explained by González et al. (2013).

This article draws data from another Southern European country—the small island state of Malta—a location that oscillates between modernity and tradition. This is partly due to its relatively strong Catholic morality and kinship ties that make it an ambivalent location (Mitchell, 2002). Malta is an archipelago of islands in the Mediterranean Sea occupying only 122 square miles, and has a history starting approximately 5,000 BC (Blouet, 1993). Lying 93 km south of Sicily and around 300 km from the Tunisian and Libyan coasts, Malta has a marginal European position, not only for its geopolitical location but also for its cultural conditions—Malta is referred to as being "ambivalent" European (Mitchell, 2002) mainly because of the way it accommodates the "modern" with the "traditional." Despite the fact that Maltese society is predominantly a conservative Catholic country, it is worth noting recent changes indicating a more liberal society which are indicating a more secular society. Such changes include the legalization of same-sex civil partnerships, after the enactment of Civil Union Act in 2014 following the legislation of same-sex marriages in 2017.

The isle of Malta is far too small to be considered as a model of Southern Europe. Far from generalizing by using Malta as a case study, this article provides insights on a location that is still relatively traditional when compared with Northern European countries. The framework of this study can be applied to any other given location that is also in ambivalence between modernity and tradition, to make sense of the interplay between structure and agency, in the life domain of women.

The data drawn on for this article are taken from 12 in-depth interviews, with two different age groups of Maltese women, who experienced their youth 50 years apart. It focuses on young females who were students, in their early twenties, in the late 2000s, in comparison with those who were in the same age group during the first half of the 1960s, who are now retired. The latter interpreted their youth in retrospective, and thus, the construction of memory was taken into consideration.

This article focuses only on women who have had opportunities for post–compulsory education. The reason for this is make sense of female experiences that were privileged enough in the 1960s to have had opportunities for post–compulsory education and, presumably, had more bargaining power in

designing their life on their own free-will. The experiences of these women are compared with those of other females, with similar or more opportunities 50 years later.

Following the research outcome, it is argued that studying changes in female agency requires a detailed analysis of both reflexive deliberations and the role of the social context on dispositions. In this article, structure and agency are not treated as if they are in opposition to each other, but, similar to what Archer (2003) argued, their difference and their relative autonomy are acknowledged. This article emphasizes the importance of the "structure of feeling" produced by a generation (Williams, 1961/1965).[1] It presents an understanding of any social formation through examining social practices and taken-for-granted behavior and beliefs of young women.

An important part of the discourse on postfeminist culture focuses on the degree of agency of young women (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006; Gill, 2007). Focusing specifically on young women's bodies, Duits and van Zoonen (2006) argue that articles of clothing such as headscarves and G-Strings position women's bodies between being objects of concern and regulation and their own agency and autonomy. They argue that girls are "capable and responsible agents, who produce 'speech acts' with their choice of clothing" (2006, p. 115). Women are more than ever exercising their personal agency, not only in their choice of clothes, but, in general, in their more individualized life domain.

Individualization Discourse

The process of individualization is about more freedom in one's life choice yet at the same time increased risks (Archer, 2000, 2003; Bauman, 1996; Beck, 1994; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2008; Giddens, 1991). Individuals are now the directors of their own life, with the consequence of experiencing uncertainties in their life biographies.

> Individualisation liberates people from traditional roles and constraints in a number of ways . . . women are cut loose from their "status fate" of compulsory housework and support by a husband . . . (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002/2008, pp. 202-203).

The concept of individualization refers to the dialectical process of disintegration and reinvention (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002/2008). Instead of following a traditional chronological order, individuals are deciding, planning, and being self-reliant in their own life course transitions. They are selecting and organizing their own sequence of life passages, not necessarily relying on collective support systems and traditional structures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2008). A person's transition into adulthood has become increasingly prolonged as a result of cultural and economic changes. Moreover, whereas life course events were more normatively structured through marriage, gender roles, and religious beliefs, individuals are now left to decide more on their own

free-will. This process has widespread ramifications in the Anglo-American context, as explained by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002/2008), especially on the lived experiences of young women.

In recent years, personal identity has become increasingly reflexive and worked out individually in relatively free choice possibilities (Beck, 1992, 1994; Giddens, 1991). Identity is said to have become increasingly a matter of choice and "a reflexively organised endeavour" (Giddens, 1991, p. 5).

The Southern European Context

Analysis of the contextual shifts in female agency requires a detailed overview of the structural and cultural conditions affecting women. Southern European countries such as Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy have certain characteristics which distinguish them. These include their geographic proximity but also their common historical and cultural legacies (Gal, 2010). These include the influence of religion (in particular Catholicism) in all aspects of social life, the central role of the family and the presence of "familism" (family solidarity and dependency) that has significant impact on employment, in particular the low rate of female participation in the labor market and family strategies (Guerrero & Naldini, 1997).

The significance of the extended family in the Southern region is different to the more Central and Northern European countries—what Reher (1998) refers to as the "weak" family link of the Northern European nuclear setting compared with the "strong" family ties of the Mediterranean region. An example of this is in the difference in family obligation in care for intergenerational relations and the way the family organizes support for its members (Cliquet, 2003; Viazzo, 2010). It has been argued that societies with traditional strong family ties, characterized by the extended family setting, are more willing to accommodate for the needs of vulnerable members in the family (Cliquet, 2003; Reher, 1998). Also, families in Southern Europe are considered highly influential in life decisions of their adult children and thus limit their personal agency—For example, Di Giulio and Rosina (2007) refer to the way Italian parents are emotionally deeply involved in the lives and decisions of their adult children, including in their choices on marriage and cohabitation. The role of the informal support network of the family plays an important role in Southern European countries. The centrality of the family in Southern countries like Greece to kinship networks changes the understanding of the functioning of the welfare state. Esping-Andersen (1990) was one of the first scholars to speak about the particularities of countries like Spain, Italy, and Greece in the conservative welfare regime, as opposed to countries like Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands.

In Southern European countries, women are more likely than men to assume care responsibilities at home and they are less likely to work outside the home, when compared with Northern countries—The rate of female employment in countries like Greece, Italy, Malta, and Spain is below 60% (European Commission, 2016b). In view of this, it is not the case in Southern European countries that "men and women are released from the gender roles prescribed by industrial society for life in the nuclear family" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 6). Furthermore, the influx of women in the labor market may not always signify more liberal gender-role ideologies, but as a result of a family strategy for collective income procurement—as discussed in a study on gender relations for Greek women (Kyriazis, 1998).

Structural and Cultural Conditions in Malta

Various restrictive norms and legislations were contributory factors influencing changes in the degree of agency in women in the last 50 years. Moreover, socioeconomic changes also played a major role in the advancement of females in society. Due to its colonial status during the 1950s and early 1960s, economic development was not at par with the situation of Western Europe (Visanich, 2012). Malta's economic development reached a surge in the last three decades of the 20th century, with the development of the welfare state, the National health services, and the implementation of subsidized housing. The rate of unemployment in the late 1960s and 1970s limited further the availability of jobs for females, and absolute priority was given to the male breadwinner.

Whereas the aforementioned socioeconomic conditions are key factors in framing the application of individualization in females' life trajectories, cultural and social conditions cannot be left unnoticed. This article focuses only on three of these conditions: the church, restrictive legislations such as the marriage bar, and changes in the educational system.

The Church

Similar to a number of other countries in Southern Europe, Catholicism in Malta occupies a privilege position that is likely to generate consent over the masses. An example of this is in the number of people who say they believe in God—94% in Malta, 88% in Cyprus, 74% in Italy, and 59% in Spain, in comparison with the average of 51% in the EU-28. At the other end of the scale are Northern countries like Finland (33%), Denmark (28%), and Sweden (18%) (Eurobarometer, 2010).

The church continuously reinforced the traditional expectations and attitudes of young women, tied to their nurturing roles. The Catholic Church, and its all-male clergy, constantly discouraged women's participation in the labor market by using mass media to infiltrate public opinion that woman's place was at home. In a memorandum by the church entitled "The Employment of Women and Their Role in Society" in 1956, it declared,

Married women should, as a rule, avoid all kinds of employment. The consequences of the employment of married women on married life may be generally classified as adverse effects, such as the refusal to bear children or neglect the children's education. (Social Action Movement, 1956, pp. 5-6)

However, it is worth noting that due to the process of secularization, the Maltese family is not solely traditional in form and function today but had changed in relation to formation and dissolution in the last 50 years. Whereas this study focused on heterosexual unions, the Maltese family is no longer exclusively heterosexual. With the introduction of the Civil Union legislation in 2013, same-sex partners are granted the same rights and obligations as in civil marriage. Alternatives to marriage are also becoming more common especially after the approval of the divorce legislation in 2011. Nevertheless, unlike demographic data of EU countries showing a decrease in marriages, with a crude marriage rate of 4.2 marriages for every 1,000 persons, Malta's crude marriage rate, at 7 per 1,000 persons, is one of the highest among EU-28 (Eurostat 2017). In Malta, marriage, in particular Catholic marriage, is still considered a normative valued rite of passage into adulthood.

In line with this, there is a general tendency in Malta of youth delaying leaving parental home, with an average age at 30.1 years—one of the highest in the EU-28 (Eurostat, 2013c). This can be explained in three ways—economically, culturally, and geographically. First, the lack of financial stability, mainly due to extending years in training, is delaying having a full-time job and transitioning into independent living. Second, the importance placed on the family as well as the Catholic mentality strengthens the tendency of moving out of parental home upon marriage. Third, the smallness of the Maltese islands limits the scope of living on campus, away from parents' home, that is at most half an hour away by car.

Marriage Bar

Up to December 1980, women in Malta were discriminated by the "marriage bar" legislation. Female workers in the public sector had to resign from work upon marriage. As Camilleri (1997) puts it,

The marriage bar served as a constant reminder that, in the eyes of the State, the place of the married woman was not in the labour force, despite her talents, but in homemaking and nurturing. (p. 27)

The main purpose of this was to keep male unemployment low; however, a side effect of this legislation was the promotion of unequal treatment between the sexes. The role of the wife/mother is still highly considered as "one of domestic labour: cooking, cleaning and nurturing, but also taking care of the family's spiritual needs" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 71).

Also, women in the 1970s experienced low wages which often reached only 50% of the wages paid to males (Pollacco,

2003). According to the "Report of the Department of Labour and Emigration" in 1964, the average hourly wage rate in the Maltese private industry for males was 13 pence and a half and 6 pence for females.

The situation for young women today did improve considerably, especially with the removal of the marriage bar. Recent measures in Malta were taken to increase the rate of participation in the labor market—These include the availability of free child care centers for working mothers, a tax break for women returning to work after childbirth, and the increase in promotion of flexible and family-friendly working conditions. This is facilitating the home-to-work transition, with the availability of training and work for young women. Unlike other Southern European countries, Malta has a low rate of youth unemployment (9.6%) compared to the EU average rate of 18.6% (Eurostat, 2015). Despite the influx in labor demand, especially after the intensive promotion for women to join the labor market, the *European Economic Forecast* (European Commission, 2016a) reports that Malta's continued economic growth and job creation are accountable for the low rate of unemployment.

Educational System

Changes in the educational system and the job market are some of the main factors contributing to postponement to events conventionally associated with entry into adulthood (Bynner & Roberts, 1991, Furlong & Cartmel, 1997/2007, Kamenetz, 2007; Sennett, 1998). The extension and expansion of the educational system in Malta in the last 30 years offered young women more access to post–compulsory education. One cannot ignore the significant gender gap in tertiary level education in the 1960s, with only 19 female students (8%) attended the Royal University of Malta in 1960. This number rose to 109 female students (19%) in 1965 and up to 165 (21%) by 1970. Today, there are more female graduates than male graduates in Malta. There are various reasons for the rise in female student numbers. First, females have more freedom of choice. Second, it is also accepted that they have a right to a career, and third, they have greater confidence on their ability to perform well in tertiary education. Nevertheless, irrespective of greater opportunities for women in Malta, more females than males opt for career breaks. There is a stark gender divide in the number of males (86.5%) and females (38.4%) in full-time employment, in households with children (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2015). Also, 88.13% of persons making use of family-friendly measures in 2014 were used by women (NSO, 2015).

The Study

The data presented in this article are taken from 12 in-depth interviews with women who were in post–compulsory education in their youth. The research uses a qualitative

approach, extending over a period of approximately 24 months, between 2010 and 2012, employing 12 in-depth interviews with Maltese females.

The parameters of the study dictated the way participants were chosen. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. My personal network was used to handpick participants who fit this criterion through sound judgment. Female participants were deliberately selected for their specific particularities—that they had completed post–compulsory education. Two generations of women were chosen to make sense of changes in the degree of personal agency—females who were young students in the late 2000s and those who were in the same age group during the first half of the 1960s and are now retired. After contacting them by phone and explaining my research, participants agreed to meet and were interviewed about their lived experiences. All participants whose interviews I am drawing here were White, heterosexuals, and living in Malta. They all had post–compulsory education; therefore, their interpretation is in no means a normalized experience for all young women of the same age group. Interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded after obtaining the participants' consent. Interviews were then transcribed and coded for themes relating to their personal agency in their youth, as they transitioned from school to work; such themes included their own personal agency and social and cultural conditions that constrained their life choices.

The process of thematic analysis pinpointed, examined, and recorded patterns in the data. Various valid themes emerged from the data analysis process, including participants' leisure activities. Such analysis may be useful and dealt with elsewhere. However, this article focuses on three themes of cultural conditions—the influence of the church, restrictive legislation, and the expansion and extension of the educational system. Research questions asked to participants were directed to their degree of personal agency—for instance, on their life plan and influence from their family network.

Despite the fact that the issues discussed were similar, it is noteworthy the different context in studying two generations of women—The presentation of a symmetrical approach in studying the life situation of youth at different moments in history was a challenging task. While present-day youth were speaking about their current experiences as young females now, the older generation relied on the memory 50 years ago to describe their lived experiences as youth. Older participants looked back at their youth in retrospective. Their knowledge was refracted by memory and evaluated in relation to their present situation that mirrored their recollections of the past. Memory is more than an expression of individual consciousness. It is socially and culturally constructed and consists of an active process of using information from the past and transforming it to the needs of the present situation (Halbwachs, 1992).[2]

All ethical procedures required by Loughborough University, the United Kingdom, have been followed, and participants recruited were informed of their rights to view transcripts, their right to withdrawal, and of having their names changed to safeguard their anonymity.

For simplification sake, I will hereafter refer to the two age groups of participants as the "young" participants, referring to participants who were young in the late 2000s, and the "older" participants who experienced their youth in the 1960s.

The Position of Women Today

Participants highlighted fundamental changes in women's lives that occurred in various areas, including education, work, and legislation, in the last 50 years. General discussions of the life experiences of young women with participants commonly evoked comments on the advantageous position of being young today. Significantly, the advancement of women and the opening up of more opportunities to study and work were espoused in both generations of women under investigation. For example, Jane, who was a 20-year-old university student during the time of interview, said,

> I don't think that women used to think so much about career but more on marriage. If they worked, it would be to have enough money to get married and stop working upon marriage. If a woman was career oriented she would be the odd one out unlike today.

Most young females I spoke to maintained that they were working hard to find an intrinsically satisfying profession from which they could earn their own living. Young female participants said that they were directing their energies toward establishing a career that brought them autonomy, unlike the traditional model of being dependent on a male breadwinner. Twenty-one-year-old Luisa commented on constraints women experienced by relating to the life experience of her mother:

> I look at my mum, she wanted to continue studying, but her father did not let her and told her to take sewing classes instead. My mother loved history and she wanted to continue studying it but she was forced to train as a seamstress. She hates sewing today. She studied something she did not want to. Today we have much more opportunities. Even when it comes to mentality, it is completely different from ours.

The traditional model of the family, having the female as the homemaker dependent on the male breadwinner, shaped the expectations and experiences of most young women in the 1960s. Most of the older female participants maintained that during their youth, most females treated marriage as a goal for economic and emotional stability—They followed a standardized transition into adulthood, often seeing employment as a temporary phase until marriage. In this manner, females' roles were mainly defined in terms of family life rather than individual pursuit.

Compared with young females in the 1960s, Jane felt she had more alternatives today on what role(s) to have and being a homemaker was just one option that she was not too keen to take. Her desire was to be a psychologist and a writer. Regardless of Jane's perceived advantageous position in having the ability to devise her own life plan, she also felt anxious about her future. In a powerful discourse about the shift in females' life chances, Jane compared her situation with her grandmother's. She said that she has more things to think about, more stress to deal with, and more uncertainty about what to do.

> Life was simpler. Although I think today women have more opportunities but I think life was simpler. Women had fewer anxieties. They only thought about marriage. So advancement has also brought about negative consequences like anxiety. A woman used to think about marriage and childcare whereas today she needs to balance the family with a career. Sometimes when I'm very anxious, by the way I'm a feminist, but sometimes I say it was better when we were simpler.

Jane felt anxious with no certainty or permanence in her chosen career path. Her "do-it-yourself biography," albeit exciting, is contradictory. It also creates an aura of the unknown and the fear of failure. Therefore, the liberating conditions from traditional stereotypical roles have also created a contradictory situation—such as the increased demand for women to juggle work and family life.

Strategies of Negotiations

While narratives of older participants highlighted societal and legislative constraints, including the marriage bar, limiting their personal agency, they also referred to their strategies of accommodation and resistance to such measures. Whereas Elise, who was 65 at the time of the interview, postponed marriage, Mary decided not to marry to pursue her career. With strong determination to keep her job and be able to plan her life on her own free-will, Mary told me that she never married. She also maintained that being the eldest child in the family, she felt responsible to take care of her sick mother after her father passed away—a typical attitude in Southern European close-knit family environment (Cliquet, 2003; Viazzo, 2010).

Ann, a retired manager with more than 30 years of experience in the banking sector, referred to her strategies of resistance by changing her job from working in the civil service to a private owned company, so that she would not be forced to resign:

> I am somewhat rebellious in a sense that I didn't follow the trend of people, I wanted to get married and start a family, it was important to keep the house clean, still I also felt that I have to apply my years of study to something and not throw them away.

Her strategies of resistance enabled her to continue working after marriage and childbirth, with only a short career break.

> If we decided to get married, we had to change job if you were employed with the civil service. You either stop working or change your job to work with a private enterprise and I honestly tell you that I did not wish to stop working. I am not one of those who leave their job just because they got married. However, when we got married, I quit my job and I took a couple of months off. Soon I found that I was pregnant. Then one fine day, my former boss phoned me. He said "we want you back." Well I told him that I have to speak to my husband. We decided that I will take the part-time job, because part-time work was offered to me because of my pregnancy. My boss who was British was very open-minded because they had family-friendly measures in the UK for years. So to me it was a golden opportunity. I was one of the lucky ones who knew what family friendly measures were in the seventies.

Elise, a retired teacher, referred to her strategy of postponing marriage to lengthen the years of being economically active.

> I lived through that [the marriage bar]. But I knew that I had a job and I would only quit once I got married. In my case I postponed marriage. I got married when I was thirty. I wanted to work because my family couldn't support me and I think the meaning of my existence is very much based on my success. I knew that I wasn't getting married any time soon to work hard. By the time I sent my resignation to get married, we received a letter that those who wanted to continue to work after marriage, they could.

Data from these interviews, however, suggest that women still felt guilty and anxious by choosing to pursue their career and family life at the same time. Ann spoke about her dilemma, what she referred to as being in between two worlds—"Half of me was connected of the workplace and half of me was at home to take care of the family, it was a dilemma; a very big dilemma." She maintained that having a career was only possible because her husband always supported her. With pride, she explained how her husband always lent a helping hand, despite her sense of guilt and anxiety of not being at home all the time:

> My husband always supported me. If it meant preparing the sandwiches for the children for school while I dressed them up, he made the sandwiches, if it meant that I do the washing and hanging and he collected the clothes, he collected the clothes, whatever and whenever I needed help, he always supported me. I wouldn't have done it without my husband's help. I would have been half a woman without his help.

Marriage and Family

Young participants maintained that the meaning of marriage was neither exclusively "Western" nor "traditional." Instead, they attempted to strike a balance between the two. Manifesting the traditional Southern European family pattern, they placed importance to marriage. However, they were willing to postpone marriage and leaving the parental home.

Regardless of the fact that marriage is being postponed to a later stage, young participants maintained that eventually they saw themselves getting married. Marriage still remains an invariable event that bridges youth and adulthood for both generations. Some participants also spoke about the possibility of having a career break when they have children. Elena, a young participant, referred to the segregated domestic roles and how she would be probably following her mother's footsteps in taking all the domestic work herself:

> I prefer staying at home and do all the housework myself and take care of the children rather than the man staying at home cleaning the house . . . I may ask him to help out when washing dishes for example. I see with my parents for instance, when my dad tries to help out, my mother always scorns at him that he doesn't do things right.

Despite her strong will to have a career, Elena feels that her dispositions shaped what for her is normative behavior to be a mother and wife. Another argument that was noteworthy during the interview was when she said,

> The question is whether I will be able to afford not working. It's not only finance, the fact that I will be able to bring my own children up is very important for me. I prefer it then taking my children to play school or leaving them with their grandmother.

Thus, female employment may not necessarily signify personal agency or equitable gender roles, but a way for collective income procurement. This resonates very well with the case of Greece, as discussed by Kyriazis (1998).

Education and Individual Responsibility

Literature on the school-to-work transition, within the Anglo-American context, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, reveals a mass transition from the classroom to the workplace (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997/2007). This process was delayed in the research location, in part, because of its colonial status and independence in the 1960s which generated high unemployment, especially among youth (Visanich, 2012). Nevertheless, for young women in the 1960s, post–compulsory training secured a job, at least until marriage. To my question, whether in the 1960s young women with post–compulsory education felt anxious when seeking a full-time job; retired participant Elise remarked how a teaching diploma guaranteed a job: "For me the fact that I had a certificate made it easier to find employment." Moreover, she maintained that she felt stress-free after finishing her teaching course because she knew she had a job. She said, "I was twenty-one when I started working, but at least I had the job. I think now they have much more stress in finding work." Nevertheless, she argued that their career paths were limited. Elise emphasized this when saying,

> The only career paths were a teacher, a nurse or a secretary in a government department or a bank clerk. Those were the only options. There were university courses but it never crossed my mind to even consider them.

Young participants maintained that although at times they felt they could reflexively design their lives, they also admitted that they felt more anxious and pressured by the educational system to obtain qualifications and increased their marketability. They maintained that the increased importance to qualifications, especially a university degree, had become a universal goal for young participants. Despite the choice in university courses, most young participants said that they were often encouraged to choose academic courses, like the teaching profession, that offers flexible family-friendly working hours. It is not a surprise that in Malta the number of females undergoing teaching course drastically outnumbers that of males.

It is a matter of fact that most young participants felt that it was their responsibility to invest in their education and a university degree was part of their trajectory into adulthood even though they were unsure what to do in their life. For instance, Lara said,

> I am studying but I don't know for what. It was just a normal process that I had entered university after obtaining my Advanced Levels. But still, I don't know what I want to do in life and which job to go for.

The argument of shouldering individual responsibility dovetails nicely with Bauman's (2013) viewpoint that neoliberal politics encourages individuals "to devise individual solutions to socially generated problems and to do it individually, using their own skills and individually possessed assets" (Bauman, 2013, p. 6). Similar to what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002/2008) argued, "your own life—your own failure," social problems become linked to psychological dispositions like guilt and anxiety.

Young people are also being burdened with the responsibility of financing their own education with the consequence of entering into significant debts before joining the workforce (Kamenetz, 2007). Nevertheless, it is significant to note out Malta's social wage, comprising of universal benefits like free health care and free education. Unlike the situation of Kamenetz (2007) in America, none of the young participants I encountered had taken up loans to finance their first degree mainly because all local students at the University of Malta do not pay fees and are given universal maintenance grants as well as receive a stipend during their course of studies. Such local peculiarity therefore tends to encourage young people into post–compulsory education.

Paradoxical Individualization

The shifts in personal agency in the life domain of women when comparing the two generations are an exemplary case

of how the concept of individualization is paradoxical— While it provides more choice for females experiencing their youth today, it, nonetheless, produced anxiety and uncertainty about the future. Traditional preconditions on females, despite their limitations, provided a sense of security and stability for women with no anxiety to construct their own life biography. Young women in late modernity maintained that they are faced with greater individual choice, but they also have to shoulder new responsibilities and deal with more anxiety.

Despite the progress made toward the equalization of sexes in the Southern European research location, young females are not completely released from traditional gender roles. Some of the young participants felt that the labor market remains biased and based on the male breadwinner model. Jane felt enthusiastic about her career, yet she was anxious about not being able to cope in the near future with multiple roles as an employee, housewife, and mother. Similarly, Maria who works part-time as a trainee news editor showed her concern that her current job might not fit well with a family life.

I don't imagine myself working as a news editor full-time. It could be because of the long hours working. They work shifts and thinking about it, if in the future I will have my own family, I won't be able to manage. The working hours are not ideal to have a family because they are not flexible hours.

Besides their individual attribution of success, most female participants were aware of their gender role expectations. It is not the case, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002/2008) asserted, that "in education young women increasingly face the same demands and opportunities as men and not least for this reason they develop increasingly similar expectations and demands for their career" (p. 66).

More generally, the accounts of participants revealed that besides individual attribution of success, they were also aware of gender role expectations. Regardless of the attempts at the equalization of the sexes and of granting greater choice for women in designing their own life beyond traditional gender roles, younger female participants felt conditioned to juggle a career and a family in the near future. Although young participants felt that they had roughly the same chances as men at work, they expressed the view that women must, at some point in her career, choose between work and family.

Discussion

Recent literature on female life experiences, in the Western context, refers to an individualization boost (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002/2008). Despite the credibility of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002/2008) argument, this article has shown that this process is not consistent with the cultural variables in Southern European context. Despite the progress

toward equitable gender relations in a Southern European context, the life biography of young women has not been completely "detraditionalized," as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002/2008) asserted.

The main objective of this article was to examine some examples of social and cultural conditions influencing the shifts in female agency in Malta, in the last 50 years. Discussions with participants on restrictive legislation, such as the marriage bar, provided insights on their own strategies of negotiation and resistance, in an attempt to exercise personal agency. To a certain extent, young participants felt more self-reliant in their decisions compared with their predecessors and were working hard to find an intrinsically satisfying profession. Nevertheless, participants emphasize that their family network still played a crucial role in their life decisions, such as when to leave parental home. Some of the young participants still felt a moral obligation to conform to traditional gender roles. They were also aware that in the near future, they needed to juggle a career with family life, possibly even having a career break, if they could afford it. Further evidence of this comes from national statistics, with a relatively low rate of female participation, especially during childbearing years, as discussed in the previous section.

The paradox of exercising their personal agency was that, albeit exciting, it is contradictory. It also creates an aura of the unknown and the fear of failure. This is not to say that anxiety is a new phenomenon for young people today. This article placed importance on the fact that older participants were looking at their youth in retrospective. It is, of course, possible that some of the participants who spoke about their youth 50 years ago may have experienced anxiety without being able to recall it and that the overwhelming nostalgic memories of their youth overshadowed their memories of negative experiences. It is also possible that some of the participants, who are experiencing youth today, overplayed their level of anxiety at times of stress due to their uncertainties of passing university exams and being able to graduate.

There were various limitations encountered during fieldwork. First, finding older participants proved to be a difficult task at times because it was hard to find women who pursued tertiary education in the 1960s. Only few women had opportunities for post–compulsory education and a full-time job especially after marriage, due to social, cultural, and legislative constraints, as explained in the previous section. Initially, four participants who happen to be my acquaintances were chosen. Later on, these interviewees suggested other participants who also had similar opportunities. Participants were willing to give me contact details of their peers, following obtaining first their consent.

Second, the small size of the sample does not allow any generalized comments to be made on young women in Southern Europe. Despite the various similarities cultural (but also different economic conditions) of Malta with other Southern European countries, Malta is not referred to here as an exemplary case of other Southern European countries.

The aim of drawing from this research is not to generalize on southern European females in general, but to give insights on the changes in the life experiences of young women.

This article suggests the need for a more nuanced exploration of the changes in the life experiences of young women in other locations in Southern Europe similar to Malta, to build a better understanding of the complex relationship between structural constraints and individual agency.

It is clear that the framework set out here for understanding the application of individualization in young women, in post–compulsory education, can be broadened and applied to explore other instances where women's choices are continuously influenced by other contextual factors and in other locations. It would also be useful to explore the application of individualization to young women with different life chances and conditions to assess how the process of individualization transcends to other social groups, who may not have opportunities for post–compulsory education.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to examine some of the shifts in personal agency in the life domain of young women, in a location in between tradition and modernity. A number of propositions can be drawn from the foregoing discussion.

First, the applicability of the process of individualization cannot be studied divorced from its context. In assessing this application, structure and agency must be bridged to make sense of the life domain of women. Despite the increasing advancement of the individualization process within the Southern European context, social and cultural conditions, such as the strong kinship ties and moral regulations, typical in Southern European countries, continue to influence young women in their life choices.

Second, this article referred to strategies of negotiation and resistance to such social and cultural conditions, especially for young women who exercised personal agency regardless of cultural and moral restrictions. The marriage bar provided a good example of this restriction and of the way some young women played around it to be able to have a career.

Third, the study discussed here illustrated the paradoxical dimension of the process of individualization—even though young women said that they had more choice, they were also experiencing anxiety and uncertainty of having multiple roles. Thus, this article presented empirical evidence on how the process of individualization is not only a liberating experience for women but also a contradictory condition. This article is a specific contribution to the argument that the bargaining in choice, evident in different aspects in the life experiences of young people, is mostly visible in the changes in the life biography of women in a location, like Malta, that is considered in ambivalence between tradition and modernity.

Notes

1. See Williams (1961/1965). He explained the concept of "structure of feeling" in *The Long Revolution* by saying,

   It is as firm and definite as "structure" suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organisation. And it is in this respect that the arts of a period, taking these to include characteristics approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed; often not consciously, but by the fact that here in the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon. (Williams, 1961/1965, pp. 64-65)

2. Key studies suggest that memory is related to the production of social identity and the narration of the past involves a process of producing the self (see Halbwachs, 1992; Tonkin, 1992). For instance, Tonkin (1992) maintained that the memory of an event modifies itself in relation to the person's reflections and understanding of that particular event. "Truth," thus, depends on the genre of the story and its audience.

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